

# Life and Death in the Bible...

## Death in the Bible

In the oldest biblical texts **death is seen as a divine judgement** which is imposed on everybody eventually (Psalm 49:7-8, Proverbs 6:35, Job 14). Death is, however, postponed for the righteous. Some of the Patriarchs were several hundred years old when they died according to Genesis. It may also be deferred by offering another life in place of that due to be judged immediately (Exodus 21:30, 30:12 and Hosea 13:14).

## Sex and Death

**The inescapability of death began at the fall** (Genesis 3-4). As St Augustine argued, all human beings were '*seminally present*' in Adam, physically descended from Eve, and thus had to atone in their own death for this original sin – *the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23). The **immaculate conception** of Jesus is significant for this reason.

By the first century BC Jewish scholars were interpreting **the sin of Adam and Eve in sexual terms**. They put on clothes after "eating the fruit" (in Hebrew probably a pomegranate, afterwards always a symbol of sex and fertility) and were ashamed. God's punishment for disobedience was of pain in childbirth working to sustain a family and the mortality necessary for a species that reproduces itself – perhaps the punishment was intended to fit the crime?

**Jesus was not affected by original sin** and was thus an innocent, upon whom no divine judgement of death could justly fall. Jesus was marked for immortality from the beginning. Prophets in the Old Testament had often been marked out by the unusual circumstances of their birth (Isaac, Moses, Samson, Samuel etc.). Having an uncertain origin made it likely that God caused their conception specially and made it more believable that they had been chosen to do God's work over other mortals. In Islam, the fact that the Prophet Mohammed's parents were said to have died young emphasised the point that he was only mortal, not special in any way.

Christian theology has long linked spiritual purity and a heavenly reward with **abstinence** or chastity (this was the excuse given by the Church to support the later requirement for priests and those in monastic orders to remain single). By the early Medieval period the Virgin Mary was, according to Catholic doctrine, taken directly into heaven. Saint Catherine of Alexandria miraculously escaped torture on a wheel because she was a virgin. Saint Frideswide defended her honour and was rewarded when her physical body proved incorruptible – a sign that sin and death could not touch the pure.

## Innocent Suffering

Jewish and Christian theologians have always struggled to explain **why God causes the innocent to suffer**. The horrendous suffering of children has presented a particular challenge, one which was seized upon by Dostoevsky in "The Brothers Karamazov".

The idea that sin could be inherited, '*the fathers eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge*' (Jeremiah 31:29, Ezekiel 18:2) was the traditional Hebrew explanation - but Jesus dismissed this, emphasising the innocence of each new generation '*suffer the little children to come to me... whoever does not enter the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it...*' (Matthew 18:3).

Nevertheless, the Early Christian, Augustinian, **doctrine of Original Sin** (whereby everybody inherits sin and earns divine punishment through the fact of their conception – there are no human innocents) represents a Christian approach to the problem of suffering which owes a lot to the Old Testament. Much of Augustine's thinking was inspired by his very literal reading of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, LXX, and a Hebrew version – though Augustine's Hebrew was not strong.) Augustine returned to the Jewish texts as a way of re-establishing the authenticity of Christianity when it had been interpreted and re-interpreted by the Greco-Roman world for centuries.

## A Second Life

The key factor making original sin compatible with Jesus' message within Christian Theology is the redemptive possibilities of **baptism**, which offers individuals hope for salvation – or at least a levelling experience in the afterlife. "*But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.'*" (Luke 16:24-26) The theologian John Hick (d.2012) relied on the principle of **eschatological verification** to account for the inequalities of experience allotted to baptised people. This takes the Irenaean argument (after St Irenaeus of Lyons, 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD), that suffering exists to offer us the opportunity to earn God's favour and a spiritual reward, one step further.

## Sheol

According to ancient Jewish belief, because of the fall, at death every individual is consigned to **Sheol**, is distanced from God.

- Sheol is an underworld that *has* gates (Job 38:17, Isaiah 38:10, Psalm 9:13) or perhaps that *is* the '*gates of hell*'. The fact that many graves in Israel are caves sealed with rocks may be behind the image of gates.
- Sheol is also described as a valley – perhaps modelled on the deep valley between the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem that was studded with graves and is entered through a gate in the walls of the city of David, used mostly by funeral processions. "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*" (Psalm 23:3-5) and "*The Spirit of the LORD set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.*" (Ezekiel 37:1)
- The whole person – body and soul - waits in Sheol in suspension. For the righteous there is an immediate reward, in that God remembers their name by listing it in a **book** (Exodus 32:32-33, Psalm 69:28, Psalm 87:6, Daniel 12:1, Luke 10:20). For the sinners even this is denied them and they are forgotten by God.
- Sheol itself is not pleasant but it is not a particular reward or punishment for the individual – just a place of waiting to which all humans must ultimately go.

There is a real similarity between the Jewish belief that all people go to the gates of hell to pay off the sin of Adam and the Roman Catholic doctrine of **Purgatory**. Purgatory represents a temporary hell which gives humans the opportunity to atone for original and non-mortal sins so that they can attain a soul sufficiently pure to be saved. The idea of progression through the 'rings' of purgatory and then heaven towards the '*beatific vision*', a conceptual system developed in Medieval works such as Dante's '*Divine Comedy*' and Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, represents a development beyond any concept that has foundation in the Old Testament (and indeed the New). An interpretation of heaven and hell that is flexible enough to allow appropriate punishments or rewards to be awarded for the range of morally good or evil acts that an individual performed has the benefit of consolidating the idea of life after death as the final part of a just God's creation. Yet the focus on the details of the afterlife draws attention to the necessary lack of certainty about the existence and nature of heaven and hell, and further raises questions concerning how an individual could possibly experience reward and punishment in another dimension. The famous empiricist challenge to rationalist theology may well apply; that it is '*nonsense on stilts*'!

**Jewish burial practice** reflects the very literal concept of Sheol that was prevalent in ancient times.

- The body should be buried quickly and protected by a cairn of stones (e.g. Joshua 8:29) – the more respected the person the more stones were heaped on top of the grave (it is still Jewish custom to add a stone to the top of a grave when you visit.).
- The grave would serve to remind the living of the existence and status of the dead person – their descendants would tend and protect it, thus being respected by community, having a large family and secure ownership of a piece of land was very important to people.
- **A grave that was disturbed or forgotten** was also seen to annihilate the dead person. This is perhaps why the neo-Nazi practice of attacking Jewish cemeteries is just so upsetting to Orthodox communities – as is the idea of being forced to move away from a traditional settlement and abandon the graves of ancestors. Recently, a settlement in the Gaza strip was abandoned as part of the peace process – the graves were carefully lifted and deposited on Israeli ground.

## Burial

In ancient times it was believed that a **body which was not sealed underground** (particularly the bones 1 Samuel 31:12-13, Psalm 34:20) was cursed. Criminals and prisoners of war were hung in trees or dismembered and attached to city walls or gates. This was believed to be the worst possible fate (Deuteronomy 21:23), perhaps because that is what ancient peoples did with the corpses of animals so that scavengers could not steal the meat. A person disposed of to rot above ground was no better than an animal and thus had no connection with God, no hope. Opening a grave, as Jesus did when he raised Lazarus, was seen to impart spiritual impurity (which would prevent worship in the Temple, participation in festivals etc.)

Being **hung in a tree** – whether or not burial followed – was a taboo. King David's son Absalom met this fate (2 Samuel 18) as did Jesus and Judas in the New Testament. Another insight into the psychological perception of death comes in the writing of the prophets. Hosea and Amos talk of divine punishment in terms of dying and being left to be eaten/decompose without burial – perhaps this was seen to be so bad because it implied that nobody was left to remember you and there would be no grave to mark your existence. Jesus' death on a cross / tree was seen to represent the fact that he was cursed (Galatians 3:13).

This taboo may well have been in reaction to the Ancient Canaanite practice of exposing bodies to be consumed by the flies – one of the names of Baal, their God, was 'the lord of the flies'.

**All of this implies that the ancient Israelites had a predominantly social interpretation of the afterlife – you live on in the memory of your descendants and in the mind/book of God (Exodus 32:33, Psalm 69:28, Ecclesiastes 12:6)**

## Judgement

The older texts in the Bible reflect a belief in **God as Judge**.

The Temple in Jerusalem was seen as God's house – the Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant on the top of which was God's judgement seat, set between the wings of two golden cherubim, and inside which were the tablets of the Law. The Ark was the highest court in the land – when the King committed an offence, God pronounced judgement from its cover.

Sometimes the fate of the Ark was seen to indicate the state of the relationship between God and the leaders of Israel – when it was carried into battle the people believed that they would win, when it was captured by their enemies the people grumbled about the competence and moral status of their rulers (Samuel, Saul etc.).

The Ark was where God's presence and the law that represented it resided. Later in Israelite History, at the time of Jesus, a formal court of seventy priests (the Sanhedrin) was assembled in the house of the High Priest next to the Temple - the different areas of the temple were known as '**courts**'.

As the belief in a final judgement, an end of time/*eschaton*, developed it was seen to be at the Temple that God would make himself known and begin the process of dividing the '*sheep from the goats*' (Ezekiel 40, Matthew 25).

## God's Book of Judgement

Ancient texts reflect a belief that God wrote the name of the righteous in a book upon their death. This contributed to a later Jewish and Christian belief that **every individual was judged by God at their death** (c.f. 2 Timothy 4:6-8). Even today some synagogues keep a book of the names of ancestors and elders of their community which is read out at Yom Kippur each year, this way the dead live on in the minds of the living and are not forgotten to God (who is believed to be present where 12 Jewish men gather together).

## A Gift of Blood

Traditionally, in Israel the burial of VIPs took place on the slopes of the Mount of Olives by the Temple so that they would certainly be judged by God - at the front of the queue. Even where this was not possible the relatives of the deceased were required to make sacrifices on behalf of the dead person to attract God's attention so that he would be inclined to judge them straight away.

Blood in the ancient world was seen as the physical life-force, the counterpart of breath which was the spiritual life-force. When God breathed into the clay body of Adam (Genesis 2) he gave him the uniquely human gift of a soul, which could be taken back at any time. Adam only owned his physical body and thus it was the only thing he could use to please God. Adam did have authority over the animals and plants though – and could use them as part of his worship at any time.

## Priesthood

For the crimes of ordinary people, the **priests** heard cases and offered sacrifices that atoned for their offences in front of the Holy of Holies - so that the sound and scent of justice would be '*before the face of*' God.

The priests acted as God's chosen representatives, the descendants of Aaron and Levi. They had the inherited, genetic authority to forgive sins and to make atonement for crimes. When Jesus forgave sins in words and actions he was claiming that spiritual authority superseded genetic authority - personal actions spoke louder than simple membership of the chosen people. This was a huge challenge to a culture based on the principle of a covenant inherited from Abraham through the female line.

When Jesus commissioned Peter saying '*whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven*' he was appointing him as his priest *on the grounds of his faith and actions on behalf of Jesus* (Latin '*vicaris*', meaning literally 'in place of'), the Aaron to Jesus' Moses, the Levi to Jesus' Joseph.

## Salvation

The Christian priesthood, indeed membership of the Christian faith (and the rewards in the afterlife that that promised), would henceforth be the result of personal choice and behaviour rather than inheritance and genetics. It could be said that, from the outset, **the major incentive to become a Christian was to acquire the possibility for personal salvation (which, in time, came to be understood as occurring after death and in more time, in another world after death)**. This was certainly why Jesus baptised, healed and taught people.

## Redemption

In ancient Jewish and later Christian philosophy, **sacrifices redeemed** the life of a sinner – compensated God for his right to take a life to make up for sin.

- In Ancient Israel every year, the High Priest laid the corporate sins of the people on a goat (the **scapegoat**) which was banished into the wilderness beyond the Temple. He then tied a cord around his ankle and went into the Holy of Holies to clean it and the Ark. These actions represented a fresh start both spiritually and literally in the relationship between the people and God, a renewal of the **covenant** in the hope that, at least for another year, God would protect the people and their right to the land.
- Jesus' followers understood that he was the "**lamb of God**". Pure white lambs were the most valuable sacrifice in the Temple – placing the sins of the people onto a lamb rather than a goat would offer a greater chance that God would forgive. When that lamb was Jesus, a willing, innocent human sacrifice, even more so. Jesus' death was understood to have redeemed the sins of those who partook in it through faith; they could have a spiritual second chance with God, hoped to constitute 'eternal life'.
- In the story of Jesus' death there was a conscious parallel with the story of **Abraham and Isaac** – Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac on the top of Mount Moriah (later the Temple Mount) and Isaac was obedient in the face of death. The show of faith made the actual death superfluous – God provided a ram to take the place of Isaac.
- There was also a parallel with the festival of **Passover** and the story of Moses. Passover was linked to the traditional renewal of the covenant at **Yom Kippur** – occurring in Spring it balanced Yom Kippur which was in the Autumn of the Jewish Calendar. At both festivals the people celebrated their escape from death and the second chance their faith offered them. In Egypt the Hebrews were given a second chance through the blood of the lamb being taken as a substitute for the lives of their firstborn sons.
- Christians saw that Jesus, in dying on the eve of Passover, took the part of the lamb and, through his blood, made it possible for the sons of Israel to escape the plague of death by atoning for their sins.

In ancient texts **blood** was what God wanted to redeem (pay compensation for) the offences people caused. Zechariah 9:11 speaks of the '*blood of my covenant with you*' (i.e. of animal sacrifice) atoning for sin.) Human blood was not demanded, except through the circumcision that marked membership of the covenant, because of the inherited privilege assured by Abraham's faith in showing that he was willing to sacrifice his innocent son Isaac. The prophecies of Isaiah 40-55 (and especially of Isaiah 53) reflect a concern that the covenant, made as a result of the laying down of innocent life, would have to be renewed if the sins of the people were to be wiped away and the relationship with God restored. He saw the Messiah (saviour) as the new sacrifice, the lamb of God and scapegoat for Israel who would usher in a new age '*the Kingdom of God*', where there would be no more suffering or death.

## Water, Death and Rebirth

The later Jewish preoccupation with **ritual bathing and baptism** reflected the desire for beginning a new life through accepting a voluntary death. Being underwater was equated with a temporary death (Jonah, the Psalms etc.); being dipped underwater and then emerging was like being born again.

Some of the prophets, and later John the Baptist and the Essenes, taught that individuals could wash away their past sins and renew their individual relationships with God through bathing/baptism and an ethical life. This teaching threatened the priestly claim that the use of *mikvot* (ritual baths) should be reserved to those who acted as intermediaries between God and sinful people. There was a growing divide between traditional priests and those who sought to establish Judaism as a personal faith rather than simply a tribal religion by the time of Jesus. The Zealots had *mikvot* on the top of Masada showing that they were willing to act for God directly rather than relying on the priests by 68AD; the Essenes had several *mikvot* at Qumran (which date to between 300BC and 66AD) showing their break with the priests.

Jesus himself was baptised and offered baptism with water through the apostles and through the holy spirit (healing and the word) in his own person (note that the Jews believed that sickness arose from inherited sin (Mark 2) and therefore healing was equivalent to washing away sins and giving an individual a spiritual second chance for salvation). Jesus claimed '*I am the water of life*' according to John 2, in John 4:14 he says '*but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*' (See also John 7:37-9, Revelation 21:6, 22:17) This shows the importance of **baptism as representing a sacramental rebirth in early Christian thought**. It offered the **only hope of surviving death**, the punishment laid on everyone who was contaminated by the sin of Adam or of their own choice.

St Paul wrote '*we were therefore buried with him through baptism in death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*' (Romans 6:4) '*I am the door of the sheep - whoever comes to the Father must come through me*' and '*I am the resurrection and the life*' are two more claims from John's Gospel which back up this point. **The importance of the possibility of individual survival beyond death for early Christianity cannot be overstated.**

## Escaping Death

**Not dying** was a privilege associated with a tiny number of righteous, sinless people.

- Elijah was taken straight to heaven – as was Jesus.
- Elisha retained the power to work miracles even after he was dead – as did the saints of the Early Church.
- Many hoped to be immortal and believed that God had the power to make life longer – the most powerful prophets were able to **raise people from death** temporarily (Elijah, Elisha, Paul – perhaps it was a way of emphasising Jesus' extra-special status that only he was given the power to grant **Eternal Life**).

Obedying the law in total obedience to God was seen as the only way of earning the privilege of not dying. Discovering the meaning of the law was therefore a major enterprise – those who claimed to possess the meaning became immensely powerful. **The possibility of individual survival beyond death was the driving force behind the power of the priests and the popularity of the prophets, latterly of Jesus.**

In Mark 10 the rich young man comes and asks Jesus what he must do to gain eternal life. John (John 5:25, 20:31, 1 John 5:13) and Paul (Philippians 2:16) both claim that they write so that people might understand the message that will give them a path to eternal life. Later Christian Gnostics claimed in even more forceful terms that knowledge of a secret wisdom held the key to immortality – a belief that was sustained until the enlightenment by alchemists.

## Death and Disaster

Prophets, from the eighth century BC onwards, began to predict a future time of enormous suffering – the images that they use include many of death and abandonment e.g. bodies left to rot, graves opened by natural disasters and raided by animals, prisoners abandoned in a waterless pit (like Sheol, but for the living). Their message is that faith in God, keeping the covenant, will eventually **atone** for the sins of the people and mean that God will return to fight Israel's battles and restore the Kingdom. The **symbolic language** of the prophecies was, naturally, taken more literally by some than others!

## A Victory over Death

The hope of the Israelites in the midst of their suffering was that **God was omnipotent and could conquer anything – even death itself**. King Hezekiah, a righteous man, is recorded in Isaiah 38:9-20 as writing about how God must hate death and want to liberate his servants from Sheol where they could not serve or worship Him. The prophet Daniel's greatest miracle was to survive three days in the waterless pit of lions – because he said that God was with him there. When Jesus died he went to Sheol, the waterless cavern of the grave, and escaped by the power of God (Psalm 22:1, Mark 15).

The underlying belief was that **death and sheol are enemies** (1 Corinthians 15:26) which stalk every living being all the days of their lives – the enemies must be fought but can only be overcome with God's direct help. God must intercede and come to fight on the side of the righteous in a great, final battle... which came to be known after the plain in northern Israel where prophets saw it happening "Armageddon".

## Liberation

From ancient times Prophets told how God will provide the necessary ransom to free the righteous from Sheol (Psalm 9:13, Hosea 13:14, 1 Corinthians 15:55). Promises such as *'because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit'* in Zechariah 9:11 could be seen as a promise that God would bring the dead back from Sheol once sufficient blood had been shed (Jesus?).

## Physical Resurrection

The Prophet Ezekiel went further, prophesying that God would return to the Temple after the Babylonian exile and, despite the fears of the Israelites, work the impossible by **bringing the dry and scattered bones of the dead back to life** (Ezekiel 37:11-14).

## Eschaton

This confirmed the later Jewish belief in a future *eschaton* – a **final judgement** after which God will establish a perfect, permanent kingdom of the righteous on earth. Prophets predicted portents of this final phase – they told that Elijah would come again to warn the people (as he had before at the point of their destruction), that a great leader, the 'Messiah', would then appear to set the world straight in preparation for God.

## Messiah

The **Messiah** was seen as a portent for the last judgement – after which a new theocracy ‘the **Kingdom of God**’ (Mark 1:15, 9:1) would be set up that would rule over all the earth (Daniel 9:26, Daniel 12:1). People would not suffer or die – it would be like a pre-fall Garden of Eden (Mark, 12:25, Matthew 22:30, Luke 20:36, Revelation 21:4). Modern Jews still call this future heaven ‘Gan Eden’.

Deutero-Isaiah develops the idea that the Messiah will be the final sacrifice, the redeemer, who will pay the ransom for human sin and enable humans to escape death with his blood. The Messiah will be the ultimate scapegoat enabling the final restoration of the covenant. This idea is later seen in the writings of Paul and elsewhere in the New Testament (Hebrews 2:10, Galatians 3:13)

## New Life

At the final judgement it was seen that the dead would be **physically resurrected** and would be judged along with the living. Jewish burial practice was designed to protect the integrity of the bones so that God could reanimate the frame. Ezekiel 37 gives one vision of the last judgement, Matthew 25 another.

Just as Sheol or the grave was seen to be a dry pit, life is often symbolised as water – the last judgement would cause the graves to be opened and water to refresh the dust of the ancestors. The ancient Babylonian text which prefigures the creation story in Genesis 2-3 (The Enuma Elish) speaks of God pouring water on dust and making man out of the clay that resulted.

Incidentally, the Pharisees had a long standing argument with the Sadducees over the spiritual purity of settlements built downstream of burial sites – Nazareth was given as an example of a corrupt place because water was drawn up from wells dug in the burial caverns underneath the houses. When the Nathaniel asks ‘*can anything good come from Nazareth*’ (John 1:26) he was asking ‘*can anybody good be resurrected in a place where the dust of the ancestors is mixed with water before the final judgement? Are not the descendants of such ancestors cursed?*’ Another example of a corrupt town, unacceptable to the Pharisees because of its water supply was Tiberias – next to Capernaum in Galilee.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark it seems certain that the judgement and reward, whether in terms of physical or spiritual resurrection, will be in the **future** as in more traditional Jewish thought. Certainly the vision of the kingdom offered in Mark’s Gospel and mirrored throughout the Synoptics is very physical ‘*my father’s house has many rooms...*’ In parts, John’s Gospel implies that it is the soul will be judged and sent straight away to a separate afterlife, in a parallel dimension – heaven (John 5:25?). This is known as **realised eschatology**.

A more **spiritual interpretation of resurrection** arrived in Judaism with Hellenistic influence. Plato saw the body as limited and evil, the soul as good. God, for the Neo-Platonists, inhabited a purely spiritual realm (unlimited, uncontaminated by evil, timeless etc...), therefore the soul was what would survive death and be rewarded by being with a good God (2 Peter 1:19).

## Dualism

John was clearly a **dualist**, ‘*the spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.*’ (John 6:63) St Paul was also influenced by such Greek thinking (Galatians 5:16). Although he apparently saw that the judgement would be in the future, in time (Philippians 2:16, Corinthians 15:26), Paul stressed the fact that it would not be the physical body that would be restored by God but a new spiritual body that would even out the inequalities of earthly experience and demonstrate God’s grace in adding to the limited lot that we can offer to him to make us whole and acceptable. The Pauline doctrine of spiritual rebirth had the practical advantage of escaping the pitfalls of belief in a physical resurrection in an age where the Romans routinely dismembered and destroyed the bodies of their Christian prisoners.

## Concluding Remarks

It seems that the belief in individual survival beyond death, whether in the social, physical or spiritual sense, whether in the future or at the point of death, has underpinned and sustained Jewish and Christian faith from their very beginnings.

Belief in the afterlife does not only offer a personal moral incentive but also provides a reason to partake in religious identity through circumcision or baptism. Through joining the wider faith community, an individual is encouraged to share responsibility for a corporate relationship with God through Temple/Synagogue or Church and so subscribe to doctrine and religious practice. The faith of individuals and the religion of communities are thus supported by belief in life after death.

Of course, the benefit to the individual of partaking in the community is central to their decision to join it - thus any belief in life after death must allow for personal reward or punishment.

Philosophers of Religion have explored the potential problems in arguing for a personal reward after future *physical* resurrection...

- There is no empirical evidence to suggest that this is possible or even probable. (The possible examples of NDEs excepted)
- It would perpetuate the gross inequalities between individuals caused by their differing physical states. (What about unborn babies, the disabled, those whose bodies have been dismembered or lost?)

Equally, there are problems in arguing that life after death will be purely *spiritual*...

- What could survive of us when the body is gone? (Materialism vs. dualism – the relationship between soul and body e.g. Ryle, epiphenomenalism, modified dualism etc.)
- Does the new body, the replica, share the feelings and memories of the old? (Identity theory)
- In what sense would my idealised self be recognisable to God, to my family or even myself? (Hick's replica theory)

Religion has no clear answers to the questions raised by talk of life after death, and often resists being “pinned down” on exactly what sort of “life after death” is being discussed...

It seems that a belief in life after death is central to religions but cannot be verified, falsified or even be rationally circumscribed.

Along with the existence of God, perhaps more so even than that, the belief in life after death is one which cannot be founded on rational propositions but which must be accepted on other grounds.